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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews ways to provide Arab Americans with a supportive school environment and all students with an accurate and unbiased education about the Middle East. The school climate will make Arab American students feel more welcome if Arab culture is included in multicultural courses and activities, and if the staff works to eliminate prejudice and discrimination. Staff development will further these goals. A curriculum that includes references to Arab culture, and the assessment of textbooks and materials to ensure the accuracy of representations of Arabs will also help ensure cultural sensitivity. To accommodate the individuality of Arab families, it is important that teachers take the lead from students and their parents when approaching them about school and other related issues. Counselors of Arab American students should respect both traditional Arab attitudes toward usual counseling practices and the Arab communication style in all interactions. Educators must also respect the importance of the nuclear and extended families for Arab Americans and the familial role of elders. By helping families cope with various levels of acculturation, language differences, and conformity to tradition, teachers can help the Arab American student develop a positive identity that is personally satisfying and respectful of the student's cultural heritage. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

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ARAB AMERICAN STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Arab Americans in U.S. schools represent more than 20 countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa. They share many similarities with other immigrant groups seeking to establish an ethnic identity in a heterogeneous country, but they also face additional challenges. These result especially from negative stereotyping; racism and discrimination; widespread misinformation about their history and culture; and, for the majority who are Muslim, the need to find ways to practice their religion in a predominantly Judeo-Christian country (Jackson, 1995).

Some Muslim Arab American parents send their children to private Muslim schools so they can receive an education consonant with the family's religious beliefs, but most opt for public schools (Zehr, 1999). As the number of Arab American students in public schools has increased, so has the array of strategies and materials for successfully integrating them. Still, many schools have not yet acknowledged Arab culture and history or counteracted Arab stereotyping (Suleiman, 1996). This digest reviews the resources available to provide Arab Americans with a supportive school environment and all students with an accurate and unbiased education on the Middle East.

School Climate

School policies and practices largely determine how welcome Arab American students feel. Schools can:

- Represent the Middle East, Arabs, and Muslims accurately, completely, and fairly in the curriculum and school activities.
- Ensure that Arab American students are treated equitably and without prejudice by teachers and peers, and that teachers respond to incidences of racism and discrimination strongly and quickly, with attention to both the perpetrators and the victims.
- Respect the customs of the native culture and religion of Arab students.

Inclusion of Arab Culture

Although Arab Americans may be one of the smaller minorities in schools, they should be represented in multicultural courses and activities to validate their culture and educate all students about the Middle East. Field trips can include visits to Arab community institutions, assembly speakers can include Arab American leaders, and film series can include Arab contributions, for example. Schools can involve Arab American families to familiarize students with the various groups' celebrations, foods, and history (ADC, 1993a).

Elimination of Prejudice and Discrimination

Because prejudice against Arab Americans increases when political events involve Arabs, or are even speculated to involve them, educators need to be prepared to respond to possible harassment of Arab American students resulting from negative news reporting, and to invoke school policies against hate crimes and discrimination as appropriate (Suleiman, 1996).

Administrators and teachers should correct erroneous information when confronted with it, such as popular myths that all Arabs are "...wealthy...barbaric and backward, and...have harems" (Farquharson, 1988, p. 4). They can help students understand that Arab Americans should not be held personally accountable for events in the Middle East (ADC, 1997). They can confront scapegoating by allowing students to air their views and helping them understand why such judgments are inaccurate and hurtful (ADC, 1997).

Schools can take care not to discriminate against Muslims. They should not enforce dress codes or showering requirements that violate the Muslim tradition of modesty or require Muslim students to engage in coed physical education classes. Educators should ensure that girls are not ridiculed for their head covering. They should not schedule tests on major Islamic holidays and should allow fasting students to go to the library instead of the cafeteria during Ramadan. Federal law permits students to organize prayer services, and schools should accommodate such requests from Muslims (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 1997). Muslims across the country are now petitioning schools to label cafeteria food containing pig products, and some schools are already doing so (Zehr, 1999).

Staff Development

Schools can provide professional development training and make available to their staff accurate resource materials about the Middle East, Islam, the various Arab groups in the U.S., and the nature and extent of anti-Arab sentiment. Middle East organizations and centers at local colleges offer schools a range of services, including training, often at no cost. For example, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) has produced a substantial Middle East bibliography for educators (1993b) and a guide for helping Arab parents serve as a resource for teachers (ADC, 1993a). Followers of Islam in particular (Arab Americans as well as other Muslim communities) want to feel respected, and providing teachers with information about the religion promotes understanding. Several groups, such as the Arab World and Islamic Resources and School Services, conduct workshops; others, including the Council on American-Islamic Relations (1997), have published materials for educators.

Curriculum

Course Content

Arab references can be infused across the curriculum to familiarize students with Middle East culture and dispel myths: Arab music, Arab art, photographs of Arab countries, American words with Arab roots, notable Arab Americans, etc.

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(ADC, 1993a). Courses in religious tolerance need to include Islam. Anti-racism training (for educators and students) should cite Arab Americans as a group targeted by bigots. Schools can also offer Arabic as a foreign language, an option available to Fairfax County, VA, students (Zehr, 1999).

To promote critical thinking skills by analyzing news reports, teachers can ask students to evaluate stories for biases, unsubstantiated accusations, or uneven treatment of Arabs and Jews that promote racism. To identify stereotyping, teachers can ask students to critique their textbooks, television programs, movies, books, and news reports for negative portrayals of Arabs; indeed, many studies document pervasive anti-Arab attitudes in the entertainment media, including cartoons (ADC, 1997; Wingfeld & Karaman, 1995).

Textbooks

A scholarly evaluation of texts covering Middle East subjects and Islam (Barlow, 1994) has documented that many of them are "deficient" and "inaccurate" (ADC, 1993a, p. 9). Further, children's fiction that portrays Arab and Jewish children together is also frequently biased against Arabs (Kissen, 1991). Therefore, educators need to evaluate materials in use and discard those with misinformation or biases. Then they can work with school districts and the state to ensure that new books are more accurate (ADC, 1993a; Council on American-Islamic Relations, 1997).

A variety of resources are available to facilitate this process. The American Forum for Global Education (Kelahan & Penn, 1996) has produced an extensive bibliography of materials on Arab history that can be used by curriculum developers, and the Arab World and Islamic Resources and School Services (Shabbas, 1998) has issued a large notebook for secondary school teachers to use as a basis for a multifaceted curriculum. In Michigan, which has the largest Arab American community in the U.S., parents work with the school system to produce a high quality and accurate curriculum (ADC, 1993a).

Communicating with Arab American Students

Arab Americans from different countries differ from each other in culture and socioeconomic status, as do Muslim and Christian Arabs, and newly-arrived and second and third generation Arabs. To accommodate the individuality of Arab families, it is important for teachers and counselors to take the lead from students and their parents when approaching them about school and other related issues, and to be knowledgeable about Arab culture as a whole (Adeed & Smith, 1997). In general, though, recent immigrants may experience culture shock, and feel insecure and lonely; all Arab Americans may feel alienated because of perceived prejudice and ridicule of their rituals, and they may express negative feelings as a defense (Jackson, 1997).

The counselors of Arab American students need to respect both traditional Arab attitudes toward usual counseling practices and the Arab communication style in all interactions. Jackson recommends first meeting with the student outside the counseling office to build rapport. Group counseling should be considered because it "reflects the Arab value of collectivism," and the group should be single sex. Also, a cognitive approach may help allow students to honor their reluctance to discuss personal feelings with strangers. Finally, Arab clients are more comfortable sitting very close to the counselor than are members of other groups (Jaclson, 1995, p. 49).

Family life and harmony are crucial to Arabs, so educators need to demonstrate respect for the sanctity of the nuclear and extended family and the familial role of elders. Nevertheless, when Arab American students seem troubled, it may be productive to determine whether their problems stem from intergenerational differences within their family or another source. Inviting family participation in the counseling process regardless of the nature of the student's problem can be useful Jackson, 1995; 1997). Because Arabs are very sensitive to public criticism, teachers should express concerns to Arab American students in a way that minimizes "loss of 'face'" (Adeed & Smith, 1997, p. 505). Finally, helping families cope with varying levels of acculturation, language differences, and conformity to tradition can enable students to develop a positive identity that is both personally satisfying and respectful of their heritage.

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